



*An Associated College of
Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*

National Access Plan Policy Consultation 2022-2026

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Response to National Access Plan Consultation Document

What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

1. We believe that the consultation document could better define what is meant by “inclusion” and what the vision for inclusion is. Specifically, are we just aiming to increase numbers of students from specific backgrounds, or is there more to it? Also, what does a truly inclusive HEI look like? What strategies, practices, attitudes and values would be in place? Is the Irish educational system “inclusive” or simply “integrative” (Ainscow, 1999)? These philosophical questions should be addressed. Without a clear definition of these terms and questions, it is difficult to understand the vision and goals we are striving towards over the next 4 years. In summary, there is a need to ensure that the next access plan clearly articulates the definition of inclusion we are striving for within the vision.

2. Item 1.3 states “The objective of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality & social inclusion” but these principles are not clearly defined and should be clearly articulated in the final document.

3. Consider promoting and increasing equity of access at both undergraduate & graduate levels of education, and not only for specific graduate programmes. For if the main focus aims to increase inclusion at the undergraduate levels, then barriers will continue to exist for individuals who wish to progress and advance their studies. As such, inclusion at both undergraduate & graduate levels should be fostered, and the relevant supports put in place to enable full equity of access to all levels of higher education for target groups (QQI Level 7-10).

4. PATH 1 initiatives have focused mainly on creating pathways for disadvantaged students into primary and post-primary initial teacher education programmes at the undergraduate & graduate levels (such as the Professional Masters of Education (PME) for primary & post-primary). We recommend that PATH 1 funding be expanded to create additional pathways for students holding both a QQI further education qualification and an appropriate undergraduate qualification to transition into initial teacher education for Further Education, such as the *Professional Diploma in Education* (Further Education) offered at Marino Institute of Education (https://www.mie.ie/en/study_with_us/postgraduate_programmes/professional_diploma_in_education_further_education). This would have a number of benefits such as the following:

a) Providing an increased number of role models for students currently enrolled in further education, given that these teachers are graduates of the further educator sector themselves, and thus, they might help foster higher education and initial teacher education aspirations in their own students;

b) Increasing the quality of Further Education teachers—a goal long recognised by the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2015) and more recently rearticulated in *Future FET: Transforming Learning—The National Education & Training Strategy 2020-2024* (Government of Ireland, 2020). Such efforts at improving teacher quality would ultimately contribute to an overall increase in the quality of provision of teaching and learning in the Further Education sector more broadly.

Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g. learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

1. There is a clear lack of diversity within the teaching profession, both within Ireland (Keane & Heinz, 2015) and internationally (Schleicher, 2014). In the Irish context, schools saw tremendous growth in the diversity of student populations, particularly during the Celtic tiger years (Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2018), and yet the teaching body has remained largely homogenous, consisting of individuals from white and middle-class backgrounds (Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2020).

Furthermore, as college graduates, teachers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds can be highly visible role models for all students, but particularly for students from underrepresented groups (HEA, Programme for Access to Higher Education, n.d.). These teachers are in a powerful position to mentor and encourage students to aspire to attend college and to consider teaching as a career. Therefore, we suggest the following initiatives:

a) Particular attention should be paid to increasing diversity in university-accredited initial teacher education courses for teachers at primary and post-primary levels. This could be done by offering dedicated foundation programmes – full-time or part-time – to prepare candidates from target groups who show interest in becoming teachers.

b) A specific number of places in all initial teacher education programmes for primary & post-primary training courses should be reserved specifically for individuals eligible for the mature-entry competition who have completed an access/foundation programme, to ensure entry onto these programmes once the foundation programme is complete. The foundation programme should enable the candidates to meet the entry criteria for the programme as defined by the Department of Education. Thus, this might lessen further disadvantage that may be caused by unsatisfactory CAO points, should these points ultimately prevent individuals from obtaining a place on their desired initial teacher education course.

2. Research-based modules and continuous professional development opportunities could be developed for all prospective and in-service/practising teachers to encourage them to consciously promote access to college for all the students they teach, thus fostering a whole-school approach to encouraging pupils to attend higher education. This would reduce the common positioning of guidance counsellors as the primary gatekeepers to information on higher education options, and potentially reduce instances whereby students have been directed away from higher education and certain professions, such as teaching, by their career guidance teachers, as was evident in qualitative research conducted in Ireland with working class student-teachers (Keane, Heinz and Lynch, 2018).

3. To address the gender imbalance in education, efforts should be made to increase the enrolment of male students in education courses, including primary teaching and early childhood education.

4. It is noted that the national consultation document contains a severe dearth of information or discussion on the access and experiences of ethnic minorities & newcomers to Ireland within higher education. Here too, greater enrolment and representation of minority ethnic students in both Higher Education more generally, and on Initial Teacher Education programmes more specifically, is needed.

5. While we welcome the national access plan including “mature students” in the discussion, it is noted that the focus in the consultation document is on “first-time” entrants, and we question whether this should be expanded to all mature students, including those who may have attempted a

course of study in higher education previously, but who may have withdrawn for whatever reason. It is important that we recognise the many added demands and responsibilities facing mature students, and not penalise those who may have previously entered HE, but who were unable to complete their course of study for whatever reason, and ensure they are not being penalised with this narrow definition of the type of mature student the access plan is targeting.

6. We were disappointed to see that the consultation paper suggests a significant decline in the number of first-time mature entrants into HE, from 13% in 2012/2013 to 7.1% presently (DFHERIS, 2021, p. 7). As such, more research and data collection should be conducted to examine the reasons behind this sharp decline, and why students may be deferring or declining to enter HE in the present climate.

How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

1. Information about access supports and opportunities should be made available to students at earlier ages starting in primary school and continued throughout post-primary, thus making students aware of options and supports at younger ages and increasing the likelihood they will aspire to higher education and apply to HE with the prerequisite knowledge to obtain and utilise available supports.

2. When students apply for a college place through the Central Applications Office (CAO), they may apply for access through the HEAR or DARE routes. If support initiatives were highlighted at this stage, increased awareness of potential supports would be generated among the targeted groups.

3. The ICT Devices scheme was a welcome initiative, which directly benefited many students from target groups and other students who were in need due to the pandemic. It would be beneficial if students could apply for a laptop before reaching college so that students know in advance whether a laptop will (or will not) be provided for their use while they are enrolled in the course on which they register. This would ensure that students and/or their families are not put under pressure to enter into agreements to purchase a laptop in advance of entering college.

4. Data could be collected systematically on target groups in order to have accurate data on the enrolment of students by ethnicity.

5. The access plan should expand data collection to look at the *post-graduation* impact of initiatives. For example, research needs to be done on the impact of Access, PATH, and other funding opportunities to review the experiences of individuals from target groups post-graduation, including their trajectories and experiences of entering into their respective professions. This is of particular importance in the area of teacher education, for we lack data in respect of whether individuals from disadvantaged groups entering into teaching as a career are a) able to obtain employment, b) whether they stay in employment, and c) what their experiences are as they attempt to break into what is often seen as a “middle class” profession (Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2018). Otherwise, it could be argued that it is not ethically sound to simply increase the number of underrepresented students in HE (and particularly in professional programmes like ITE), if practices post-graduation in the professional level and larger society are not changing and similarly becoming more inclusive. Such efforts at research would also lend insight to whether initiatives like Access and PATH are contributing to the creation of a more diverse and tolerant workforce and Irish society at large. Career guidance targeted at such students from early in their course would be beneficial.

How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

1. In item 2.10 reference is made to providing additional funding for student wellbeing and mental health supports. This is to be welcomed and should be sustained for at least the next 2-3 years. However, inconsistencies occur in how funding is allocated to institutions. For example, some higher education institutions, including Marino Institute of Education, received no support towards its counselling services for students. In order to support all students' mental health and wellbeing, this should be addressed in future dissemination of funds.

2. It seems that part-time students are often excluded from financial supports. However, those who opt to study part-time may do so because of additional duties and responsibilities that prevent them from taking on a course full-time—such as work and caring for family. Thus, studying full-time (and the corresponding benefits allotted to this) is a luxury they cannot afford. As such, studying and academic progression presents a considerable burden to these individuals. In light of these difficulties and additional responsibilities that full-time and younger students may not have, financial assistance (including SUSI and the Student Assistance Funds) should be made available to part-time students.

3. As noted in Section 1 above, for students from target groups who complete a general degree, without a professional qualification, it would be worth supporting them in progressing from undergraduate courses in order to encourage students to pursue postgraduate studies, especially in an area that will give them a professional qualification. One such example would be to support students to progress from undergraduate qualifications onto professional ITE programmes, such as the *Professional Diploma in Education (Further Education)* offered at Marino Institute of Education (https://www.mie.ie/en/study_with_us/postgraduate_programmes/professional_diploma_in_education_further_education).

4. It is recommended that SUSI grant and related processes be reviewed. For example, equal opportunities for funding of full and part-time courses should be provided. The fairness of the dependent status should also be reviewed, particularly for those who may be under the age of 23. Additionally, efforts should be made to reduce the stigma around being in receipt of the grant, and the reduction or removal of penalties for students who may leave a course of study early, and wish to restart their studies at a later date. To help support students beyond undergraduate level, extend SUSI supports to help people in full time and part time programmes of study, or develop separate supports for graduate students that can be used for both full time and part time programmes of study. See point 2 above in this section, outlining why full-time study is often not an option for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lastly, steps should be taken to ensure that the amount of SUSI funding provided to students will sufficiently cover the cost of study, particularly for those students who must study and live in large urban centres, where the cost of living is disproportionately higher. Such cost of living can often put higher education out of reach of many individuals.

How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

1. As noted above, information about access supports and opportunities should be made available to students at earlier ages starting in primary school and continuing throughout post-primary, thus making students aware of options and supports at younger ages and increasing the likelihood they

will aspire to Higher Education and apply to HEIs with the prerequisite knowledge to obtain and utilise available supports.

2. Education of staff throughout all levels of the system (primary, post-primary, further, and higher education) on the impact and interplay of disadvantage (in all its forms) and educational outcomes. Many educators may simply lack knowledge on these issues, and knowledge can help them to address educational disadvantage more readily in their classrooms and schools. Additionally, anti-bias training may be useful in helping teachers to become aware of subconscious biases they hold, and how to reduce such prejudices.

3. Training & CPD opportunities should be provided (particularly to instructors in FE and HE) to improve teaching methodologies utilised in the sector, while lessening reliance on traditional didactic approaches. Instructors should be encouraged and educated to move towards utilising a wider array of innovative and evidence-based teaching methodologies and restructure their modules according to the principles of *Universal Design for Learning*.

4. HEIs should similarly be encouraged to lessen reliance on traditional methods of assessment (i.e. terminal written exams) and towards utilisation of a greater variety of continuous assessment methods to allow students to display their knowledge in a variety of ways, and to develop students' transferable skillsets more generally.

How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

1. We suggest that efforts be made at raising the overall profile of Further Education Qualifications, so they are viewed as a viable *first option* for those wishing to progress to Higher Education, and not only as a second place if one doesn't obtain the required number of CAO points and/or obtain a place in their desired higher education course. Such an initiative might help to reduce any stigma that can often surround Further Education and related QQI qualifications.

2. A certain number of places in undergraduate and graduate programmes of study should be reserved specifically for mature students & those with prior FE qualifications.

3. Following on from point 2 above, entrance into higher education for those with a prior further education (FE) qualification should be based on the level of merits and distinctions achieved in their FE programme of study, and thereby, reduce reliance on CAO scores. Furthermore, CAO points should not negatively impact entry into HE for individuals who have shown they are able to successfully complete an FE qualification and achieve the prerequisite number of distinctions.

4. We recommend that advanced placement options & recognition of prior learning be created between HEIs and FE colleges, so that students with an approved QQI Level qualification can gain advanced entry into the HE programme of their choice, for example, being admitted directly into Year 2. Such efforts would help to further increase the prestige of FE qualifications, showing they have merit and relevance for higher studies, and that they lead to further progression routes.

5. As part of PATH 1 funding, St. Angela's College Sligo has worked towards the creation of a pathway for FE students into their concurrent BA/PME ITE programme for teaching (St. Angela's College Sligo, *Access to Post-Primary Teaching Project*, n.d.). It is recommended that additional pathways be forged to support FE students in a seamless transition to the HE programme of their choice, with a clear line of study from FE to HE level.

What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

1. COVID-19 has forced many institutions to increase online provision—and this may be a better and more realistic mode of study, particularly for disadvantaged students who may need the flexibility that online learning provides, or who may be unable to afford the costs of studying and living in a large urban centre, where many of our HEIs are located. As such, supports should be made to encourage HEIs to increase offerings of online provision, thus giving students more choice in how and when they study. Such efforts may make the chance of earning a University degree possible for more people, and enable students to achieve a better work/life balance—in turn, further supporting increased graduation rates. Additionally, we maintain that students wanting to study fully online are given the same level of financial and social supports as those engaged in more traditional modes of study.

2. As previously noted above: The ICT Devices scheme was a welcome initiative, which directly benefited many students from target groups and other students who were in need due to the pandemic. It would be beneficial if students could apply for a laptop before reaching college so that students know in advance whether a laptop will (or will not) be provided for their use while they are enrolled in the course on which they register. This would ensure that students and/or their families are not put under pressure to enter into agreements to purchase a laptop in advance of entering college.

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